

Saving The Democratic Internet:

Opponents of the open Internet like to portray its guiding rule, Net Neutrality, as "a government takeover of the Internet."

They argue that from the day of its inception the Internet has existed free of regulation -- a perfect expression of the marketplace at work.

What they don't understand is that the Internet is a far better expression of democracy, and as such needs rules like Net Neutrality to ensure all users have equal access to online content.

And in reality the Internet as we now know it would never have existed were it not for rules and regulation, beginning with the openness standards created by the Internet's founders some 40 years ago, codified in the Telecommunications Act of 1996 and updated in recent orders by the Federal Communications Commission.

Internet users often take these rules for granted. We expect to access all websites without interference. We can visit our nephew's blog as easily as we can CNN.com.

But our ability to connect doesn't happen in a vacuum; Net Neutrality protections are responsible for making these freedoms common to everyone.

This could change, however, if corporate Republicans get their way in the Senate this week. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas is planning a Thursday vote on a "resolution of disapproval" that would void the FCC's 2010 Open Internet order and strip the agency of any authority to stop corporations from taking control of the Internet from users.

Washington Doublespeak

Sen. Hutchison, who has AT&T's corporate headquarters in her back yard, has long carried water in Washington for the phone and cable lobby. Her resolution couldn't come at a worse time for Internet users. These companies are pushing plans to prioritize certain kinds of online and mobile traffic while downgrading the sites, applications and services that the rest of us may want to use.

But when speaking last week about the resolution, Sen. Hutchison got it backwards. The Internet "has created new products, new services, because it is open, because there hasn't been a gatekeeper," she said, adding that she introduced the Senate resolution because it's good for Internet users like you and me.

Come again? Sen. Hutchinson seeks to keep the Internet's gatekeepers at bay by forcing through a measure that would allow companies like AT&T and Comcast to block traffic without consequences.

The hypocrisy is as thick in the House, where resolution proponent Rep. Marsha Blackburn recently said the Open Internet rules are akin to the FCC "building an Internet Iron Curtain that will restrict more of our freedom."

Did you get that? According to Rep. Blackburn supporters of the open Internet are Soviet-styled Communists, hell-bent on walling off the Web and silencing your voice.

Such is the doublespeak that emanates from Washington these days. If senators pass this week's resolution, their digital ignorance will become a problem for the rest of us, which is why Internet users need to protest the resolution with full force.

The Internet Wrecking Ball

The phone and cable companies behind this scheme have long sought to take a wrecking ball to the Web's democratic foundation. In their thinking they need to destroy the Internet to rebuild it to better serve their bottom lines. The needs of the rest of us are just an afterthought.

And concerns about blocking are not limited to access to websites, and they are not hypothetical. In 2007 Comcast was caught red-handed blocking people seeking to share files using the popular BitTorrent platform. That same year, Verizon Wireless rejected NARAL Pro-Choice America's request to send text messages over its network, claiming them to be "unsavory" and "controversial." While Verizon soon reversed this decision, its attorneys still assert the company's right to block text messages at will.

Today, mobile carrier MetroPCS is touting a plan that bans all other video services on mobile devices in favor of YouTube. Other carriers are lining up payment schemes that will conceal whole sections of the Internet behind paywalls.

As more people use the Internet for all things media, Internet providers have massive financial incentives to make sites and services pay a premium to reach their users, and to make their users pay extra to experience the entire Internet. And with most Americans having two or fewer options for broadband in their respective markets, there's not enough competition to hold these companies in check.

Congress should not pass a resolution that lets a few wealthy corporations get away with hijacking our online rights. The open Internet is far too important to the rest of us.

